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SUBJECT: MINISTRY OF PUBLIC SECURITY IN HCMC SEEKS POLITICAL
DIALOGUE

REF: HCMC 878 and previous

1. (SBU) Summary: PolOff (accompanied by RSO) was invited to a first-ever meeting at HCMC's Ministry of Public Security (MPS) headquarters at which officials made a pitch for greater cooperation between the MPS and ConGen on political issues. The clear implication was that this cooperation was possible in the aftermath of the Prime Minister's visit to the United States. The officials presented a detailed (and unsolicited) briefing on events surrounding the self-immolation of two Hoa Hao believers in the Mekong Delta earlier in August and pushed for the USG to take action against the U.S.-based Vietnamese activist Nguyen Huu Chanh. We welcomed the opportunity for dialogue, but cautioned that there will be areas of disagreement, such as our strongly held view that democracy activists are not/not terrorists. End Summary.

2. (SBU) On August 31, at the invitation of the HCMC office of the Ministry of Public Security, PolOff joined HCMC RSO and visiting Hanoi RSO for a meeting at the regional MPS headquarters. Participating for the MPS were Senior Colonel Le Cong Hoang, Deputy Director, Anti-Terrorism Department; Colonel Nguyen Huu Nam, Deputy Director, Anti-Terrorism Department, Standing Office, HCMC Branch; and Nguyen Viet Cuong, Assistant, Standing Office, HCMC Branch.

3. (SBU) Following a discussion on ConGen security issues (septel), Colonel Hoang gave a detailed briefing on the MPS version of events that led to the arrest of nine Hoa Hao activists earlier in August and the self-immolation of two of those individuals (reftels). He emphasized that he was providing this information as a gesture of goodwill to address U.S. concerns and to underscore that none of these individuals were arrested for religious or political reasons but because they violated Vietnamese law. He criticized Hoa Hao dissident leader Le Quang Liem for manipulating and misleading these individuals who had a "low level of education." (See paragraph 8, below, for an informal translation of the MPS briefing paper on the Hoa Hao.)

4. (SBU) Hoang raised the case of the "terrorist" Nguyen Huu Chanh, asking why the USG has not taken action against him even though the GVN had complained repeatedly about his anti-GVN activities in the United States. He repeated MPS allegations that they "had evidence" that Chanh has hired people to funnel money and weapons to Vietnam and continues to encourage anti-GVN activity in the United States. PolOff told Hoang that freedom of speech was strictly protected in the United States. However, if the GVN had evidence that Chanh had been involved in activities that fomented violence, such as smuggling weapons into Vietnam, it was incumbent upon the GVN to pass that evidence for the USG to assess and to take appropriate action.

MPS Charm Offensive?

5. (SBU) Hoang made a strong pitch for greater cooperation and exchange between the MPS and ConGen HCMC on political issues. This cooperation was in the interest of both sides, Hoang stated, and was another example of how our relationship had changed following the visit of PM Khai to the United States. He went as far as to say that MPS HCMC had wanted to preview its action against the Hoa Hao in the Mekong Delta with us before it occurred, but that "circumstances" prevented such a meeting from taking place. Hoang said that such interaction would allow us to better understand MPS concerns over "terrorists" such as Tran Khue, who use their contacts with ConGenOffs to protect themselves from the police. (Along with Dr. Nguyen Dan Que, Tran Khue is a leading democracy activist living in Ho Chi Minh City.)

Lots to Discuss

6. (SBU) PolOff thanked the MPS for their briefing on the Hoa Hao and underscored that, while we believe that the reasons for the Hoa Hao protests are complex and do involve issues of religious freedom, the USG repudiates self-immolation as a form of protest. We emphasized that we try to ensure that our activities -- even our meetings with dissidents -- are transparent and that the USG respects Vietnam's security and stability. Our goal was to obtain the most accurate picture possible of Vietnam. A case in point is the Central Highlands, where we have been able to take advantage of improved access to report to policymakers in Washington that the situation there was more complex and nuanced than some might

portray. We offered to brief the MPS officials on the results of our upcoming visit to the Central Highlands province of Gia Lai, scheduled for September 6-9. While welcoming the opportunity to open a new channel of dialogue, PolOff cautioned that we should anticipate that there will continue to be areas where we disagree, such as on the definition of terrorism. ConGenOffs would continue to meet with individuals such as Tran Khue or Dr. Nguyen Dan Que.

17. (SBU) Comment: The MPS overture was unanticipated. HCMC had been seeking to meet with HCMC MPS officials on these issues for nearly a year, but our requests for meetings had gone unanswered. (We have had better luck in the Central Highlands and other provinces.) The MPS officials made clear that Prime Minister Khai's visit to the United States made possible this development, to which we plan to respond positively. The polite and professional tone of the discussion also was a pleasant surprise. The MPS official made no effort to dissuade, bluster or cajole us to stop meeting with "persons of mutual concern," and acknowledged that we were doing our jobs in doing so. End Comment.

18. (SBU) Begin Text of Unofficial Translation of MPS Paper on Hoa Hao:

Ministry of Public Security
Anti-Terrorism Bureau
Ho Chi Minh City, August 30, 2005

To: Representative of the U.S. Consulate General in HCMC

Recently, a number of people in Dong Thap and An Giang provinces have violated laws and been dealt with administratively or criminally by authorities. During the course of law enforcement, these people did not follow the laws (some even poured gasoline over themselves and were burned, causing injuries and death), therefore negatively affecting local security and the political situation. Without sufficient information, there have been many mistaken opinions about the nature of the incident. The incident happened as follows:

- On the morning of June 3, 2005, on the inter-village road No. 1, Long Dinh hamlet, Cho Moi district, An Giang province, Tran Van Ut (born 1972, resided in Dong Thap) was found driving a motorbike without the motorbike registration certificate (he was carrying Nguyen Do Hung, born 1964, resided in Dong Thap); Vo Van Buu (born 1969, resided in An Giang) was found driving a motorbike without a driving license and helmet (he was carrying Nguyen Van Hung, born 1978, resided in An Giang); To Van Manh (born 1950, resided in Dong Thap) was found driving a motorbike carrying bulky stuff. For these violations, the traffic control team of Cho Moi district Police administratively fined these people. However, Ut, Buu and Manh refused to sign the minutes of violations and later, together with Nguyen Van Hung, walked side by side in the middle of the road, drumming a box (which Manh carried with him), shouting and screaming, causing disorder. Buu bought gasoline and poured it over himself, sitting in the road and causing a traffic jam for 30 minutes.

- In the afternoon, these elements went to Mrs. Gam's house, in group 15, Nhon Loi hamlet, Nhon My commune, Cho Moi district and continued the disturbance. When authorities arrived, these people incited a number of other people to oppose officials on duty, breaking equipment, detaining vehicles of officials and willfully causing injuries to the officials. Buu continued to pour gasoline over himself and was ready to self-immolate, inciting the public to gather and to scream, and causing disorder. Local forces and authorities patiently educated and convinced these people until they finally left the next afternoon.

For these continued and organized violations, An Giang provincial investigation police started criminal investigations and temporarily detained the following 9 defendants:

- Tran Van Ut, To Van Manh, Nguyen Van Dien (resided in Dong Thap), Vo Van Buu, Mai Thi Dung (resided in An Giang) for causing public disorder, violating Article 245 of the Criminal Code of Vietnam;

- Nguyen Thanh Phong, Nguyen Thi Ha, Vo Van Thanh Long (resided in An Giang) for opposing officials on duty, violating Article 257 of the Criminal Code of Vietnam;

- Vo Van Thanh Liem (resided in An Giang) for willfully injuring others, violating Article 104 of the Criminal Code of Vietnam.

While the investigation police were enforcing the arrest warrant, Tran Van Ut and Vo Van Buu poured gasoline over themselves to prevent the police from carrying out their duties. These two defendants were taken to An Giang Hospital (the closest hospital capable of treatment). However, due to excessively serious burns, Tran Van Ut died the night of August 5, 2005.

Understanding that the U.S. Consulate General is interested in the above incident from the perspective of protecting religious freedom, we confirmed that these were normal activities of law-enforcement authorities in preventing crime and fighting

criminals, and had no relation to religious activities. The GVN always guarantees the rights of belief and religious freedom for every citizen. At this moment, the local public strongly supports the above actions against these defendants. The violations committed by these defendants continue to be investigated by local law enforcement authorities and will be dealt with according to the laws of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

End Text of Unofficial Translation of MPS Paper on Hoa Hao.

WINNICK